



Philosophers, metaphysicians and Theosophists: these 19th century writers and authors all may have influenced D. D. Palmer and the formulation of his ideas. Left above and right: Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalist, writer and naturalist (1817-1862). Above right: Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeter, leading Theosophists and co-authors of *Occult Chemistry*. Below: Madame Helena Blavatsky (1839-1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society.



D.D. Palmer And The Metaphysical Movement in the 19th Century

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The metaphysical movement was a loosely arranged philosophical and religious movement. It initially emerged during the 1830s from Emerson's transcendentalism but its cornerstone was spiritualism from which spread a variety of sects. This paper will explore D.D. Palmer's activity in both spiritualism and an important offshoot called Theosophy. It will examine how Palmer's involvement probably led him into magnetic healing and later strongly influenced his chiropractic philosophy.

Heretofore little exploration of D.D. Palmer's role in the metaphysical movements of his time has been attempted. Their influences on him and consequently the profession needs to be documented and understood. Various chiropractic authors have noted the isolated fact of his involvement with spiritualism but with little consideration of its significance.¹ Other chiropractic literature has also delved into the philosophical and scientific roots of chiropractic without investigation of the metaphysical influences.²

There are a variety of reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that Palmer never directly explained these influences on himself. It may not be an overstatement to say that this metaphysical influence is far more important than the unsubstantiated osteopathic influence so often referred to by various writers.

Chiropractic writers need to understand D.D. Palmer as a whole personality because of his importance to the profession. He cannot be understood, as is usually attempted, by examining his writings out of the context of his time nor without reference to both his scientific and metaphysical beliefs. A significant problem is that his most accessible writings are in two books, *The Chiropractor's Adjustor* (1910) and to a lesser extent, *The Chiropractor* (1914).^{3, 4} These books represent the final years of his life and give few clues to the development of the sometimes controversial ideas they contain. Relating this obscurity with the fact that Palmer led an almost nomadic and largely undocumented life after 1902 and one has a problem in understanding the man.

Previously, one writer has explored one aspect of this influence while examining the origin of Innate philosophy.⁵ This presentation will build on that lead by demonstrating how these metaphysical influences were crucial to the development of chiropractic science and philosophy.

We need to understand what the metaphysical movement was. The term is borrowed from J. Stillson Judah who used it to lend utility in collectively describing this wide-ranging movement.⁶ Judah noted that spiritualism, which developed in this country in the 1840s, came to spawn a large array of interrelated religious, healing and paranormal investigative groups. Judah had this to say:

We may reasonably seek a common ground for all these, since the seeds of the basic philosophies were briefly and swiftly sown between 1840 and 1875, in an area stretching no farther than from Maine to New York. Much of their foundation was the extreme liberalism of American transcendentalism, which first began in the 1830s and produced the influential philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁷

Although their goals may sometimes differ, the metaphysical movements exhibit a common philosophical core with individualistic variations that increase proportionately to the proliferation of sects. Still they are like branches of a single tree growing out of the cultural soil that produced American transcendentalism.⁸

The two groups of this movement that most reflect Palmer's beliefs are spiritualism and Theosophy. It is my belief that Palmer's initial involvement with spiritualism in the early 1870s led him into magnetic healing in the 1880s. Certainly this type of healing reflects many of the beliefs of spiritualists of that time. While involved with magnetic healing and spiritualism, it seems logical to assume that Palmer became exposed to the metaphysical movement as a whole. He doubtlessly was attracted to the intellectually greater scope of the Theosophists.

The birth of American spiritualism is usually set in the year 1848. Within forty years it was so popular that serious research societies were organized by prominent citizens and

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scientists both here and in Europe.⁹ Today spiritualism is more remembered, if at all, for spirit mediums, and colorful seances, or for the fraud often detected when those mediums "contacted spirits". However, few today realize how well accepted it was in its day and how much impact it has had on religion to the present.¹⁰

Judah included a representative list of nine principles underlying the movement that hold for present day spiritualist groups. Reviewing the list one can only speculate how radical they must have appeared to the more orthodox members of the Victorian age. Among these, critical to this analysis of Palmer, is the belief. . . "that the phenomena of nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence."¹¹ Another also affirms . . . "that communications with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism."¹² Judah clarifies further when he says that spiritualists believe that. . . "man as uncreated spirit has always been in existence" and that after death there is. . . "only eternal progression" of the spirit.¹³ Anyone familiar with Palmer's writings immediately sees the strong spiritualistic influences.¹⁴

Theosophy was founded in 1875 by spiritualist Helena Blavatsky. It was organized as a society around three objectives:

1. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color;
2. The study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies, and sciences, and the demonstration of such study; and
3. The investigation of the unexplained laws of Nature and the psychical powers latent in man.¹⁵

Apparently the Theosophic influence on Palmer was especially strong in regard to its effort to reconcile orthodox religion with the rapid advance of science in that time. Judah said that "as a science, it tries to discover hidden spiritual laws, while believing that ultimately both spiritual and natural laws will be discovered to be one."¹⁶

It would seem, as noted earlier, that Palmer came to be a magnetic healer via his spiritual investigations. During this time his keen clinical observations of disease surely surfaced.

His observations of the poor results of standard medical treatment must have taken on great significance when coupled with a theosophically inspired respect for science.¹⁷ This probably led him to study anatomy, physiology, and the various healing systems. Within a few years he came to reject all these systems as but variations of the same ancient disease model. This reasoning, I believe, led to his discovery of chiropractic.¹⁸

It may be easiest to examine Palmer from two interrelated aspects: Palmer the "metaphysical student" beginning around 1870 and Palmer the "scientific student" beginning around 1890. From 1890 until about 1905-08, there is evidence

that he began to blend these two belief systems. His two books (1910, 1914) are the culmination of this process.

It is as difficult to categorize Palmer's metaphysical beliefs as it is to separate the various sects in the movement. It does seem clear that he did not believe in reincarnation or karma as did the Theosophists but held to a more spiritualistic-like evolutionary view.¹⁹ Palmer did believe in the ability to beneficially communicate with the spirit world.²⁰ The Theosophists, on the other hand, generally downplayed the practice as worthless although possible in a restricted sense.

His concept of a dual mind, innate and educated, as he called the parts, follows a similar Theosophical belief.^{21,22} Palmer's belief in the ability to develop psychic powers such as telepathy or intuition seem to be well accepted by both groups.²³ His two books contain dozens of references that can only be explained by his involvement with the metaphysical movement. Rather than exhaustively examine the obvious, one can move on to other evidence that substantiates the metaphysical influence.

The additional evidence for the importance of metaphysical influences on Palmer is varied and there are three separate pieces of it. They include the composition of his "traveling library", his friendship with William J. Colville, and most importantly the timing (1905-08) and nature of his departure from more mechanistic chiropractic philosophy.

The "traveling library", the name given it by D.D. himself, contained a large selection of books, pamphlets, and book advertisements from the 1870s and 1880s.²⁴ It seems fair to assume that these books were all purchased around that time. This collection has a variety of metaphysical topics including magnetism, Oriental philosophy, spiritual evolution, and occult philosophy about the nature of disease. Certainly the ideas they represented must have been important for him to bind them together and carry them around with him. Among these is one book co-authored by Theosophic leader Anne Besant.²⁵ Another contains a large ad for a book on Theosophy by D.D.'s friend W.J. Colville.²⁶

It is not certain when Palmer and Colville met but Palmer refers to him as his old friend in his 1910 book.²⁷ Palmer entertained Colville at his home and was given "typewritten information" concerning a centuries old cult practicing a form of spinal manipulation.²⁸ D.D. also includes a poem in his book written by Colville, presumably composed specifically for the book. It is dated September 24, 1910 so we can assume Palmer entertained Colville on or around that date.²⁹ Colville may have been on a lecture tour of the West Coast. Although Colville published on the East Coast, he apparently lectured on both coasts on occult subjects, particularly mental science.^{30,31} He appears to have been a fairly prolific writer in addition to being an accomplished lecturer. Of his books, three were compilations of lectures on Theosophy.^{32,33,34} In correspondence and discussion with Dora Kunz, President of the Theosophical Society in America, she stated that although

Colville wrote on Theosophy she felt he had a more spiritualistic orientation.^{35,36} She noted that at least one of his books was from a spiritualistic publishing house.³⁷

From study of the two men I have concluded that both had similar metaphysical orientations which would certainly account for their friendship. Hopefully future research will reveal more about this relationship. It would be helpful to know how long they knew each other, if correspondence exists, and if Colville helped Palmer formulate any of his chiropractic philosophy. Unfortunately, none of Colville's books examined contained much useful biographical information. Efforts to trace him through other channels have been uniformly unsuccessful.

Palmer's philosophy underwent a change in nature as he synthesized his scientific and metaphysical belief systems. This first became apparent when Innate Intelligence was introduced as a concept sometime around 1904.³⁸ Recent investigations demonstrate that Palmer first published an article on Innate in February 1906.³⁹ In two earlier instances, the Palmer school monthly journal contained letters from Palmer students that refer briefly to Innate Intelligence, but not in any detail.^{40,41} In an August 1905 issue of the journal is a reference to a leaflet on Innate that was available upon request.⁴² So it is most likely that Innate was discussed in the classroom for some time before the February article appeared. In previous issues of the Palmer journal the editor referred to innate relative to certain types of nerves only.

This reference is found in the definition of chiropractic that was invariably placed on the inside cover. The usage of innate in that context was similar to what today would be termed involuntary or autonomic nerves. It is apparent then that between 1904 and 1906 Innate philosophy matured. Following this turning point, D.D.'s philosophy appears to have been completed between 1908 and the publication of his book in 1910. At this point innate had become a spiritual intelligence that ran the complicated functioning of the body.

In the 1910 book we also see the emergence of two new Palmer teachings that are important to this paper. Palmer uses his principle of tone and his "nerve vibration theory" to tie together his new concepts of chiropractic.

Palmer claims the principle of tone as the basic principle upon which all chiropractic is founded.⁴³ His definition appears to be a combination of definitions of tone taken from two turn-of-the-century dictionaries. These dictionaries are part of the Palmer college archives and probably belonged to him. Gould's Medical Dictionary describes tone as . . . "the normal activity, strength, and excitability of the various organs and functions as observed in a state of health".⁴⁴ Dunglison's Medical Dictionary talks in terms of "excessive tonic-ity" causing "erethism or crispness" while "deficient tonic-ity" causes "atony or weakness."⁴⁵ Those definitions are echoed by Palmer. He stated repeatedly that disease is the coexistent problems of improper function and tone.⁴⁶

Palmer's vibratory nerve theory is somewhat strange today and generally misunderstood. For instance, Haldeman dismissed it in a 1973 paper as indicating that D.D. was behind the times scientifically.⁴⁷ Certainly a similar theory enjoyed scientific consideration ten or twenty years before but was largely ignored by 1910. This theory seems all the stranger with the evidence that Palmer knew the leading theories of his time. He owned and quoted generously from prevailing orthodox texts on the subject.⁴⁸ Why would he maintain such a questionable theory when he was constantly criticizing other chiropractors for not knowing basic anatomy?

Evidence of his attitude toward the scientific data on nerve function was probably voiced later by Vedder in his 1916 Palmer college text on physiology. Vedder states. . . "in nerves we have a response to a vibration, proven not by observing the change in the nerve itself, but by noting the action of the tissue to which it passes." ⁴⁹ Similarly D.D. quoted a medical text that lent some credibility to the notion that a molecular vibratory chain reaction could still be the essential part of the nerve impulse.⁵⁰ Why did D.D. make such a point of emphasizing this particular theory? Why did this otherwise careful student of biology get so dogmatic on a seemingly noncrucial point that could have awaited further research?

The first part of the answer seems to lie with the metaphysical side of the man. "Vibratory physics" has always played an important part in metaphysical explanations of the relation between spirit and matter. Theosophists and Palmer held to a more modern version of the centuries-old universal ether theory. This theory supposedly accounted for the fact that natural forces such as light propagation, gravity, and magnetic forces had to work through some real, although invisible, medium.^{51,52}

Occultists picked up on various vibratory theories viewing light as matter at a lighter density and with a higher vibratory rate. This reasoning was extended to spirit, which was believed to be a subtler form of matter with its own peculiar vibratory rate.⁵³ Crucial here is the fact that Palmer believed, like other occultists, that thoughts were also explainable by ether theory. This is why he felt thoughts could be sent telepathically or received intuitively.

Unfortunately for the occultists, the ether theory had been dealt a blow by Einstein's 1905 paper on special relativity.⁵⁴ By this time most scientists were beginning to doubt the ether theory's necessity in explaining physical phenomena although just a few years earlier it had been considered good science.

If Einstein's discounting of ether theory was accurate it made short work of the vibratory theories. In 1907-08, however, a series of alleged clairvoyant observations were made of various atoms such as helium and oxygen.⁵⁵ This was done by two leading Theosophists, Charles Leadbeater and Anne Besant.⁵⁶ Their defense of vibratory physics probably helped

keep alive this occult theory, and was published in a series of articles in a journal of the Theosophical Society.

Shortly thereafter in 1908 they were published in a book.⁵⁷ In essence their defense was that scientists couldn't yet measure these very subtle etheric levels as they were called. Theosophists claimed, and still do, that there are seven densities of matter.⁵⁸ Liquids, solids, and gases are the three usual densities of matter observable by everyone. Besant and Leadbeater claimed to have observed the four other densities of etheric levels. Their publication must have given the metaphysical movement, such as it was by that time, renewed hope.

The timing of the Theosophists' work and the emergence of Palmer's two new teachings is curious. I believe D.D. picked up on this "research" and extended these metaphysical theories to chiropractic science. He stuck with a vibratory nerve theory to account for increased or decreased tone in disease states. According to his theory, a subluxation caused either a tension or laxity on a spinal nerve. This change in normal nerve tension affected the vibratory transmission rate of the nerve. D.D. compared this to the change in the tone produced on a musical stringed instrument by tightening or loosening the string tension.⁵⁹ The nerve could then transmit too much or too little nerve force causing disturbed tone in the target tissue, thereby resulting in disease. Since his Innate Intelligence required a way of expressing itself biologically, this theory was crucial. A vibratory nerve theory appeared to him to make a logical mechanism whereby innate could control the body by instigating and receiving vibratory signals. The bridge between spirit and matter had been spanned.

At this point Palmer had joined chiropractic science with his metaphysical beliefs. Some asked why Palmer placed the fledgling profession onto such scientifically questionable ground. Surely he knew the scientific community couldn't accept his speculative views.

One reason may be simply the old metaphysician's final project, a tendency in that type of man to sum up his life. A more likely reason may have been an attempt to protect chiropractic from medical persecution. We can not forget that D.D. was arrested and convicted for practicing medicine in 1906. He knew the danger political medicine represented to chiropractic. Palmer talks about such legal protection in his 1914 book. By placing this at the beginning of his book, he indicated the importance he placed on it. He explains how religious beliefs, including spiritual healing methods, were judiciously considered in many new health laws.⁶⁰ Chiropractic religion in that light must have made sense to him. All he needed was a system that met both scientific and religious criteria. His system was that, being internally consistent and certainly plausible given the state of scientific knowledge and religious beliefs in his time.

Palmer seemed to only want to go just so far, legally. He made an interesting and careful distinction between what he termed subjective and objective religious practices. He

claimed no intention of organizing a so-called objective religion, meaning one with outwardly discernable rituals and practices.⁶¹ He felt that his metaphysical views were merely subjective religion describing it as . . . "the moral and religious duty, the inner intellectual feeling" . . . of the chiropractor.⁶² He saw his beliefs as a nonconflicting enlargement of individual religious views. In this way he held to a viewpoint that he felt gave chiropractic legal protection yet didn't offend any doctor's beliefs. Despite Lerner's contention, D.D. wanted chiropractic to be a religion in a protective legal sense rather than as a "religious cult."^{63,64}

There is an interesting aspect of Palmer's 1914 book published posthumously by his widow. After noticing a similarity in names between Colville's spiritualistic publishing house and Palmer's last publisher, I asked Dora Kunz about it. She confirmed my suspicion that this West Coast publisher was also a spiritualistic house. I am unsure of its significance other than to say it was consistent with his final efforts to qualify chiropractic as a legal religion.

This paper may help future chiropractic historians and writers to put D.D. Palmer into a proper social and historical context. For too long, Palmer has been quoted out of context, criticized unfairly, and generally misunderstood because various writers haven't taken the effort to know him. Having noted the metaphysical movement's influence on D.D., leaves one with the question of the movement's impact on the chiropractic profession.

To a large extent, his last version of chiropractic died with him in 1913. His principle of tone, for instance, never had much impact on the profession. Many of Palmer's ideas still influence chiropractic, however.

Although his nerve theory was generally ignored, it did find some acceptance.^{65,66} The Palmer school, under the direction of Palmer's son B.J., did seem to endorse it but in a de-emphasized manner.^{67,68} Interestingly, his idea that the nerve could have increased as well as decreased function is still often quoted. It is unlikely, however, that the various users recognize what the full theory was.

Innate philosophy has survived generally intact but separated from the rest of Palmer's ideas. It has been a central concept in the philosophical disputes of chiropractors, but like much of what D.D. originated, its original meaning has been obscured and its metaphysical roots never understood.

To those who will write the emerging history of chiropractic I offer these words of D.D. . . . "Truth and honesty are twins; reason is their guardian."⁶⁹ To those who have and will continue to unfairly criticize the man and the profession he founded without adequate investigation I offer these Palmer words. . . "A waste of money—a ten dollar hat on ten cent's worth of brains."⁷⁰

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